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# 4. Who let the blogs out? Media and free speech in post-coup Fiji

## ABSTRACT

Fiji's fourth armed seizure of government on 5 December 2006 delivered more than a new administration—it heralded the onslaught of a new media environment. With a heavy military crackdown on dissenting opinion and subsequent self-censorship of mainstream media, anonymous weblogs became a safe option for expressing anti-coup views. But because some anonymous blogs allowed racist, defamatory and provocative views to flourish, the role of the press and journalistic ethics was also seen as important. This article examines how a new—and uneasy—media combination kept freedom of expression alive in the months following the coup d'état.

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**S**OON after military commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama seized control of Fiji on 5 December 2006 in the country's fourth coup d'état, he pledged: 'We will uphold media freedom' (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, 2006). But in the aftermath of the armed takeover of government, it became increasingly clear that 'media freedom' was being applied as the right to continue to publish unhindered, providing it did not give too much credence to anti-military views.

In such a climate—where sources of information were running dry, mainstream media were under fire and the military not averse to 'repatriotising' outspoken critics—blogs came into their own. Blogs presented a platform through which anti-takeover views could be aired publicly, anonymously and without restriction. In effect, by cracking down on media and freedom of expression, the military had unleashed the blogs—and its subsequent public relations nightmare was worse than anything that could have been delivered under a fully functioning free press. The blogs' no-holds-barred approach to military criticism picked holes in media coverage of the crisis, with blogs

running stories detailing alleged military abuse as well as releasing several confidential documents. This included the report of the Forum Eminent Persons' Group (EPG) on Fiji's political crisis (*Intelligentsiya*, 2007, February 20).

However, because some blog content was racist, defamatory, provocative and irresponsible, the argument for a free, responsible press was also strengthened as an option worth maintaining in any society. Thus in the ensuing struggle to uphold the right to freedom of expression, an uneasy—and unknowing—alliance was forged between blogs and the press in post-coup Fiji.

This article used qualitative methods to gauge changes in the media environment in Fiji as a result of the country's fourth coup. Based on interviews with media executives and a survey of working journalists, it assessed the impact of military repression of dissenting views on the press, the subsequent rise in anonymous political blogs and the type of content they delivered—and the challenges these have presented for freedom of expression in post-coup Fiji.

### **Fiji and the coups**

Fiji experienced two military coups in 1987 followed by a takeover of government in May 2000 by civilians and renegade soldiers, which later led to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) seizing power.<sup>1</sup> But while earlier coups were said to have been aimed at curbing political dominance of Indo-Fijians, 2006 heralded a new era. For the first time the indigenous Fijian-dominated military had overthrown an indigenous Fijian-dominated ruling party, the Soqosoqo Duavata Ni Lewenivanua (SDL).

This latest coup differs from the earlier three in that the perpetrators of the 1987 and 2000 coups claimed they were acting to save indigenous Fijians and their land from subjugation to other ethnic groups, while in 2006 the RFMF Commander claimed to be acting to combat corruption. The 2006 coup is therefore the first one not to be purportedly justified by ethnic concerns—although there are inevitably claims that it is secretly backed by ethnic Indians as 'payback' for the 2000 coup (Yabaki, 2007).

The perception that the 2006 coup was an Indo-Fijian one was widely held by Fijians, as Fiji's deposed Vice-President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi told a meeting in Canberra, Australia, six months after the military takeover:

The interim government is unfortunately perceived by many in the Fijian heartland as the handmaiden of Mr [Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra] Chaudhry. Many Fijians are convinced this was an Indo-Fijian coup. Still others think it was a Muslim coup because of the association with a few prominent Muslims. These perceptions, even if mistaken, pass for reality from which conclusions are drawn. (Madraiwiwi, 2007)

In Fiji, race has been institutionalised since before independence in 1970. Citizens are officially categorised according to ethnicity and voting is conducted on racial lines. Indo-Fijians outnumbered Fijians from before independence until 1987, when the first coup encouraged higher levels of emigration. In 1966—four years before independence—Indo-Fijians made up 50.5 percent of the 476,700 population, Fijians were at 42.4 percent, with people of other races making up the remaining 7.1 percent. In 1986—the year before Fiji’s first coup—Indo-Fijians comprised 48.7 percent with Fijians at 46 percent of the 715,000 population (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The 1987 and 2000 coups delivered major drops in Indo-Fijian numbers due to emigration. By 2000, Indo-Fijians were estimated to have fallen to 41 percent of the 810,400 population. In 2006, this was estimated to have dropped further to 36.7 percent, with Fijians estimated at 55 percent of the 853,000 population (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, n.d). The interim government planned a National Census for 16 September 2007 as part of an electoral reform process that could mean a realignment of boundaries and the number of seats in Parliament to which each racial group was entitled.

The mainstream media steered clear of coverage of contentious issues such as race or political agendas after the 2006 coup. Many current senior journalists or editors in newsrooms today were young reporters in 1987 when Sitiveni Rabuka closed the mainstream press for up to two weeks after negative reports. Perhaps some did not want a repeat of 2000, when George Speight became a media superstar as he fettered the press and fuelled racial hatred with his indigenous paramouncy rhetoric.

In December 2006, the military’s immediate enforcement of Public Emergency Regulations meant that any public statements that could incite violence, insurrection or paint the military in a negative light were rigorously policed.

The effect the commander has had in the short time he has had centre stage is profound. No other Fijian leader, Rabuka and Apolosi Ranawai included, has so directly confronted the Fijian establishment and remained seemingly unscathed. He has in turn scorned the SDL government, the Methodist Church and the Bose Levu Vakaturaga [Great Council of Chiefs]. He has had verbal jousts with those of chiefly rank (Madraiwiwi, 2007).

In that climate, anonymous claims such as those about Indo-Fijian ‘payback’ and support for the coup, military abuses and conspiracy theories were suppressed in the mainstream media. In the blogosphere, however, these flourished.

### **Dissenting opinion under fire**

In part, the military itself was responsible for the number of political blogs that expanded the mediascape in Fiji during early 2007 because of the restrictions it had placed on dissenting opinion in the mainstream media and, indeed, across the nation in general. Within hours of the military’s December 2006 coup, armed and unarmed soldiers were stationed at the nation’s six mainstream media newsrooms—*The Fiji Times*, *Fiji Sun*, *Daily Post*, Fiji Television, Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and Communications Fiji Ltd—in an attempt to directly control the press. At least two mainstream media groups—*The Fiji Times* and Fiji Television—decided not to publish for a day to protest against demands for military censorship and monitoring within newsrooms. *The Fiji Times* stance was laid out by publisher Tony Yianni who said the military demands breached both the Constitution of Fiji and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

We were ordered to breach the Constitution and not publish any dissenting views that may be sent to us by free citizens, as well as the views of legally elected members of the Qarase government. If we do not have the freedom to publish with responsibility, then we do not publish. We would never and have never published anything that would incite people to do wrongdoing. The *Bill of Rights* is for everybody and not just for the Army. I think the military needs to remember an age-old truism in a battle between guns and pens, pens always win (*The Fiji Times*, 7 December 2006).

The military's demands that soldiers be stationed in newsrooms were only withdrawn after talks between management teams, the military and the Fiji Media Council. Where direct censorship failed, the weeks and months that followed saw other forms of military intervention succeed. Newsrooms were under increasing pressure over any stories that involved criticism of the military, with editors and reporters made keenly aware of the need to tread carefully.

On 2 February 2007, *Fiji Times* photographer Sitiveni Moce was forcibly taken to the military barracks after he was seen taking pictures of soldiers in a public place. *The Fiji Times* criticised this 'manhandling' of Moce in the course of his work, saying:

The military has not stopped, or issued any directive to stop, media personnel taking pictures of soldiers in public places. In fact in most cases taking pictures of soldiers has been encouraged because it is seen as assisting in promoting the military's clean-up campaign. (*The Fiji Times*, 3 February 2007)

### **The Fiji newsroom survey 2007 – methodology**

The situation was the same across Fiji's six mainstream media organizations when their managers and editors were interviewed at the end of April for an industry perspective paper by the author for Media Freedom Day on 3 May 2007. Two methods were used to gauge the situation in newsrooms since 5 December 2006. Firstly, the heads of the six mainstream media organisations, including radio, print and television, were interviewed. Secondly, journalists, photographers and camera-crew across the country were surveyed. Together these formed the basis of the Fiji newsroom survey (Foster, 2007).

The survey found that since 5 December 2006, Fiji newsrooms had become the target of a crackdown on any dissenting opinion, which the military and the interim administration justified through the Public Emergency Regulation and its specific curtailing of freedom of expression (p. 2). The military had spared none of the mainstream media organisations from having to explain particular stories or actions taken in the course of their work.

In some cases, media personnel were picked up by soldiers while in others they were told to voluntarily appear or be picked up under duress.

While the majority of the cautionary interviews have been civil, there are cases where media personnel have [been] subjected to intimidation, assault and other threats by individual soldiers. (p. 2)

Although editors from all six organisations said they received phone calls from soldiers over any anti-military stories they published, the Fiji Newsroom Survey said most of these had ceased by May 3. However, some news personnel continued to field such military calls at least once a week, if not every other day, up to that period (ibid.).

Newsroom managers were very aware that the media environment was not a free one and that staff needed extra protection. Among crucial measures taken during the period were attempts to reduce the unpredictability of the military response to criticism.

One mainstream media organisation indicated during the survey that its measures in this regard included greater communication between reporters and the editor, upholding the Fiji Media Council Code of Ethics and the editor making himself personally available to resolve military complaints.

For journalists, photographers and camera crew at the front line of news-gathering, the repressive environment was more keenly felt. As part of the survey, journalists, photographers and camera crew were asked: 'Since the December 5 takeover, do you feel free to write (shoot/edit) the news as you find it?' Only 24.4 percent said yes. The vast majority (75.6 percent) said no, with several agreeing that they were 'almost treading on eggshells when it came to any stories that involved the military' (p. 3).

A major concern expressed by journalists was that the element of balance was missing in stories because many official and other sources of information had become uncooperative due to a fear of reprisal from the military. The second question asked in the survey was: 'Do you feel harassed when covering news?' Only 35.1 percent said no, while just over 64 per cent considered that they felt harassed while on news duty (p. 4).

With the media openly admitting that it was not free to do its work, the administration in Fiji ran a risk that information sources would go 'underground' or that people would get suppressed information through the 'coconut wireless' or, in this case, its new media digital format—blogs.

### **Blogs – the new 'coconut wireless'**

Blogs are not a new part of the media mix for Fiji. In fact, at least 20

weblogs were active before the military seized control of Fiji in December 2006 (Hammond-Thrasher, 2006). At least three of those blogs were running political commentary, with the rest offering travel stories, family, business opportunities and general information on Fiji or for people with links to Fiji. However, it was not until January 2007 that blogs started to gain greater prominence when they started to be used by pro-democracy supporters to vent their frustration. This use of online technology as a channel for resistance to military rule was a totally new concept for Fiji and saw blogs rapidly become part of everyday vocabulary.

Fifty-two days after the military takeover, on 26 January 2007, the first resistance blog, *Intelligentsiya*,<sup>2</sup> went online declaring: ‘In a time when ordinary citizens are afraid to speak their minds fearing that armed soldiers might turn up at their doorsteps to take them away, *Intelligentsiya* will be a platform for free speech’ (*Intelligentsiya*, 30 January 2007). Four days later *Intelligentsiya* reported a harrowing account of one woman’s treatment in military detention. It was a month-old account that no media organisation had until then made public—and it opened the online floodgates (*ibid.*).

By Media Freedom Day, 13 pro-democracy/anti-military blogs were in existence with thousands of ‘hits’ to their credit. At the time of writing there were 22 anti-military/pro-democracy sites, some of which had placed themselves under the umbrella of an association called Fiji Freedom Bloggers. Interestingly there are also four pro-military/anti-SDL sites, two of which were set up to try to directly counter allegations made by the so-called ‘resistance’ blogs.

### **Characteristics of the blogs**

Both the pro and anti-military sites are run anonymously, with all comments made either anonymously or under assumed online identities. Recurring themes of the blogs include breaches of the law, military, democracy, freedom of speech, corruption, fresh elections, Commodore Bainimarama, the ousted SDL government, indigenous aspirations, race and land. The sources of information for blogs are said to be ‘agents, insiders, reliable sources, military and police leaks’.

At least two sites are purely in the Fijian language, while others are in English, with comments in both English and Fijian. In most cases, bloggers revert to Fijian for swearing, curses and racist comments—though it is



unclear whether this is a bid to thwart censors/hosts of the blog site, reach target audiences or because of comfort with the language.

Fiji Broadcasting Corporation editor Matai Akauola, a board member of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), regards the trend as something that the indigenous Fijian community needed to consider carefully: ‘It’s a lesson for us because a lot of Fijians have gone to blogs to let it all out. Some had to close their blogsites because of all the negative things that were coming through ... There’s a feeling that we are being restricted’ (M. Akauola, personal communication, 2007).

The popularity of certain blogs seems to correspond with how exclusive or ‘juicy’ its information is. The most popular site with the highest number of comments as this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* went to press was *Whyfijiscrying*.<sup>3</sup> The site was originally published as *Resistfranksoup*, which went online in March 2007, declaring it was ‘inspired by the snowballing Fiji people’s resistance movement to Frank Bainimarama’s coup.’<sup>4</sup>

### **The crackdown on blogs**

On 9 May 2007, a blogger warned that the military was attempting to block the IP address of *Resistfranksoup* and that the authors should ‘take preemptive action now, and consider migrating your blog to another host’ (*Resistfranksoup*, 9 May 2007). That site and several others changed hosts and continued blogging amid greater publicity that the military crackdown of the sites had delivered through mainstream media stories.

This site plus the original ‘resistance’ blog *Intelligentsiya* suffered a significant loss of credibility. *Intelligentsiya*’s claim that a fourth person had died in military custody in the north of the country was taken up by some mainstream media organisations—but this information was later proved to be false (*Intelligentsiya*, 5 March 2007). By March 12, the blog acknowledged that a mistake had been made: ‘*Intelligentsiya* reported last week the death of a man in Vanua Levu after being beaten up allegedly by soldiers. We have now obtained information that he did NOT die but was seriously assaulted’ (*Intelligentsiya*, 12 March 2007).

However, in the one week between that publication and acknowledgement, the military instituted a crackdown on bloggers. ‘I don’t know where the media got their information and let me remind those who are trying to insult the military that they [will] be dealt with if they continue to make false

statements,' military spokesman Major Neumi Leweni was reported as saying (*Intelligentsiya*, 6 March 2007). Indeed, it was during that week that *Resist-frankscoup* announced that the chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs, Ratu Ovini Bokini, had died and passed on its condolences to his family (*Resist-frankscoup*, 9 May 2007). He was later heard on radio alive and well.

While both these stories gave the blogs publicity (albeit negative), they also added fuel to the military's claims that the blogs contained entirely fabricated information. Commodore Bainimarama issued a warning for bloggers and media on 9 March 2007:

I would like to restate the interim government's unwavering commitment to its constitutional obligation of freedom of the press and other media as enshrined in s30(b) of our Constitution. However, like all other freedoms, these are not limitless, even in a free and democratic society. There is a necessity to exercise maturity, responsibility, and sensitivity as unbalanced and provocative reporting can create unnecessary fear, anxiety and reaction. One such irresponsible reporting is journalists picking up stories from bogus websites such as *Intelligentsiya.com* [sic] and printing them in local media without ascertaining the correctness [sic] or validity of information contained in such reports. In particular, the reports of four deaths linked to the military are totally baseless, mischievous and irresponsible. Journalists who run false and malicious stories such as these will definitely be taken in for questioning (Fiji Government Online Portal, 9 March 2007).

### **The uneasy alliance**

In September, nine months after the military coup, media professionals agreed that anonymous political blogs had changed the media landscape in Fiji in 2007. But, according to former *Fiji Times* editor-in-chief and current publisher of the *Fiji Sun*, Russell Hunter, blogs and journalism do not share ideals: 'The basic ideals of journalism are accuracy and credibility. You achieve that by being accountable to your readership. Blogs are not accountable to their readership because nobody knows who they are' (R. Hunter, personal communication, 2007). The Fiji Media Council chairman, Daryl Tarte, acknowledges that blogs are a growing phenomenon that mainstream Fiji media will eventually have to deal with it. But he refuses to give anonymous blogs any credibility: 'Blogs that are properly signed and sourced probably have got a place in journalism. But it's the ones that are not signed

that I think should be ignored' (D. Tarte, personal communication, 2007). University of the South Pacific head of journalism Shailendra Singh (2002) pointed to the racial and political make-up of Fiji and cautioned that in such a situation an 'irresponsible media can be like a bull in a china-shop, capable of wreaking serious damage'.

Some media organisations, however, have found it a challenge to ignore news tips from blogs. In March, Fiji Television outgoing head of news and current affairs Netani Rika found himself being spat at in a cell in the Queen Elizabeth military barracks as a result of a story his newsroom had run on its 6pm news bulletin.<sup>5</sup> The story was based on *Intelligentsiya's* tip that a fourth person had died in military custody. By the time the next major bulletin aired at 10pm, the story had been 'pulled', Rika said, because of inaccuracies.

I didn't find out until much later that [the newsroom] had verified the information from unsafe sources. The downside to blogs is that it allows some rumour or half-truth to masquerade as the truth. It's not good for the media because in the end some people will think that we are not covering certain issues because we are scared or intimidated or whatever. But, in actual fact, some of these cases can't be run because it doesn't meet our ethical guidelines (N. Rika, personal communication, 2007).

Foreign journalists have also not been averse to citing information from resistance blogs. A blog-based story by Auckland-based Fairfax Media journalist Michael Field highlighted a call by *Whyfijiscrying* bloggers for violence and attacks against tourists. Field's story said the internet blog had 'called for attacks on tourists and has provided recipes for making Molotov cocktails and bombs'. He added that Fiji's military had been trying to close down blogs but *Whyfijiscrying* had survived and called for 'guerilla war'.<sup>6</sup> Fiji Media Council executive secretary Bob Pratt said Field's action led to a series of discussions over whether to file a complaint with the New Zealand Press Council.

My complaint was that a well known professional journalist should use such a source... it's like taking a news bulletin off the writing on the walls of a public lavatory. There's no source. So all he did was quote from this blog from which he didn't know the source. And as I said for

a professional journalist of his standing that's not on (B. Pratt, personal communication, 2007).

Field counters this, arguing that the story of resistance blogs calling for attacks on New Zealand tourists was a newsworthy one:

The story contained a specific warning that blogs sites were unverifiable and that we had asked for comment from the Commander's office (whose telephone answering person was told what it was about) and Leweni. A message was left with the latter and he did not reply. The bulk of the story was in fact about how serious the military were taking blogs by grabbing people. As this particular story mentioned New Zealanders it was news in New Zealand (M. Field, personal communication, 2007).

Tarte believes there is room for the Fiji media industry's Code of Ethics to be amended to cover the professional practice of journalists in the blogosphere: 'I'm sure we will, but let the whole process evolve a bit more so it becomes clearer (D. Tarte, personal communication, 2007).'

At least one local web forum, *FijivillageTalk*, had seen the online chat arena evolve during Fiji's 2000 coup. William Parkinson, managing director of Communications Fiji Ltd, which owns the site, made a decision to close it temporarily in mid-March 2007.

We've been increasingly concerned at some of the content which has been posted in this chat room. More and more obscene and racist type of commentary has been popping up and it's been a great concern for us. We just don't have the resources to manage this type of thing properly and so we really felt that in this current environment it was time to just shut it down for a while and let everybody cool off. This is not a new approach for us, we did this in 2000 during a similar kind of crisis and we just felt that it was wise under the current circumstances (Radio Australia, 16 March 2007).

In July, the board of PINA made a statement, saying it 'recognises the existence of blogs (weblogs) and personal online websites as an avenue for freedom of expression'. But it added PINA 'does not recognise personal blogs (unless otherwise accredited) as an official form of media or reliable information for use by journalists' (PINA, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Fiji's interim government did not lift the Public Emergency Regulation (PER) until the end of May 2007. During the six-month period that it was in operation, the military's crackdown on individual freedoms—including freedom of expression—was rigorous. The rise of blogs during that period has shown that in the digital age the press does not have to be the only champion of freedom of expression. But that does not mean anonymous blogs are necessarily the best way to take advantage of that freedom fairly and with justice.

While the mainstream media may deplore the lack of ethics and guidelines displayed in some blogs, it must endeavour to make fullest use of new media avenues for providing information and expression. If the press is the watchdog of the people, perhaps blogs need to be seen not as the mongrel brother but the bulldog ready to be let loose at a moment's notice. If nothing else, such an approach would put heavy-handed administrations on notice—and warn them of the unpredictable consequences of any future infringements on a free press.

On 6 September 2007, the PER was reinstated on the advice of the Military Council in a bid to stop Laisenia Qarase and his followers from making public statements against the interim government.<sup>8</sup> When this edition of *PJR* went to press, no military action had been taken to censor the media. However, the reinstated PER had effectively silenced Qarase and his party members who have since refused to publicly comment on any matters of national importance.

## Notes

1. Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka staged the first two coups on 14 May and 25 September 1987.
2. [intelligentsiya.blogspot.com](http://intelligentsiya.blogspot.com)
3. [whyfijiscrying.wordpress.com](http://whyfijiscrying.wordpress.com)
4. [www.resistfrankscoup.blogspot.com](http://www.resistfrankscoup.blogspot.com) This site is currently defunct, with attempts to access it redirected to the Google search engine.
5. Radio Australia, 2007, May 25.
6. Hammond-Thrasher, 2007, June 22. Field's original story ran on [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz) but this has since been taken off the site.
7. PINA, 2007, July 23.
8. Fiji Government Online Portal. (2007, September 7). Commodore Bainimarama attributed the reinstatement of the Public Emergency Regulation to public statements

made by Laisenia Qarase, alleging that the former PM had a ‘campaign of lies, deceit and incitement’ that could affect ‘stability and security’ in Fiji.

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